

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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RESISTING REVENGE

1 Samuel 24:1-22

The story of Edmond Dantes is a classic story of betrayal, injustice, intrigue and revenge. Dantes was a young Frenchman at the time of Napoleon's exile on Elba in the early 19th century. Betrayed by his closest friend, Fernand Mondego, and wrongly imprisoned in a maximum security prison know as Chateau D'If, Dantes was consumed with thoughts of vengeance as he rotted in the prison for thirteen unbearably long years.

Dantes was befriended in prison by a fellow prisoner – a wise old man who gradually transformed the uneducated Dantes into a worldly-wise, learned and cultured man. When the old man realized he was dying, he told Dantes about a great treasure and where it was buried.

Dantes managed to escape from Chateau D'If by hiding himself in his friend's burial sack which was to be thrown over the cliffs and into the water surrounding the island prison fortress. After enduring many dangers, toils and snares, Dantes found the treasure (which made him extraordinarily wealthy), assumed a new identity as the Count of Monte Cristo, purchased a huge estate near Paris, and set out to exact his revenge on those who had betrayed him years ago – Mondego (now a count and married to Dantes' former love, Mercedes), Danglars (a former shipping colleague, now a baron), and Villefort (the former magistrate who sent Dantes to prison, now a chief prosecutor in Paris).

One by one, Edmond Dantes got his revenge on each of them. And those who have read Alexandre Dumas' story of *The Count of Monte Cristo* or have seen the 2002 film version of the story would root for Dantes in his resolve for revenge and would celebrate as those who had betrayed him and treated him unjustly got what they deserved.

We would celebrate too in his reunion and reconciliation at long last with Mercedes, who revealed that she had married Mondego only after being told that Edmond was dead, and discovering she was pregnant with Edmond's son.

Betrayal. Injustice. Intrigue. Revenge. Sweet revenge. And who could blame Edmond Dantes? Far from blaming him, we would cheer for him as he carried out his plan of revenge.

The story of David and Saul in 1 Samuel 24 is markedly different from the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The story of David and Saul is not a story of betrayal and revenge, but of revenge resisted. David was a man who resisted the urge and the opportunity to exact revenge on King Saul, who, consumed with jealousy, was intent on killing him.

1 Samuel 24 tells us about the first of two occasions where David had the opportunity to kill Saul and refused to do any harm to the king. The second occasion is in 1 Samuel 26, which we'll look at in a few minutes.

In 1 Samuel 24 Saul – obsessed with getting David out of the picture – takes a hit squad of 3,000 men on a mission to find and kill David. David, on the run from Saul, had been forced to become a fugitive in the Judean wilderness. David and his men found refuge at En Gedi, in the caves in the cliffs high above the Dead Sea.

Saul was hunting for David. But in the midst of his pursuit, what happened? Nature called. There is a time when you have to answer the call of nature. So Saul went into a cave to take care of business – to “relieve himself” (24:3).

In the providence of God, David and his men were hiding in that very cave. David sneaked up on Saul at the king's most vulnerable moment. But instead of harming Saul, David quietly cut off the corner of the king's robe and then retreated until Saul left the cave.

Though his men urged him to seize the moment and kill Saul, David spared the king's life. He refused to take vengeance into his own hands. He resolved to leave that to God.

But David did do this. After Saul left the cave, David came out, called to him, and told Saul that he could have killed him but he didn't. As proof he held up the piece of the king's robe he had cut off in the cave.

Confronted with the evidence of David's mercy, Saul was stricken in his conscience – if only temporarily – and stopped pursuing David. But only temporarily.

If you jump ahead to 1 Samuel 26, you discover that it is “déjà vu all over again,” as Yogi Berra would say.

Once again the Lord delivers Saul into David's hands. Once again David spares Saul's life. Once again David refuses to lift up his hands against Saul. Once again David demonstrates his innocence of any treason or treachery against Saul.

This time David and one of his men, Abishai, went down to the camp of Saul and saw where the king was lying down, sound asleep. Verse 12 says that everyone in the camp was sleeping, because the Lord Himself had put them in a deep sleep. So no one saw David and Abishai as they sneaked into the camp, went right to where Saul was lying, and took Saul's spear and water jug from near his head. Then they left. No one in the camp of Saul knew about it. No one woke up.

Then David went back to his men with Saul's spear and water jug in his possession. From a hill some distance away he called out to Abner, the commander of Saul's army and to the king himself. As he had done in chapter 24 after cutting off the corner of

Saul's robe, David again displays the evidence – this time the spear and water jug – to show that though he could have killed Saul, he would do nothing to harm him.

Nobody – least of all the men with David – would have blamed David if on either of those occasions he had taken Saul's life. Who would have blamed David for taking revenge on Saul for all the grief Saul had caused Him?

But David did not. David would not. Neither in the cave at En Gedi (ch. 24) nor in the camp of the king (ch. 26).

Why not? Why did David spare the one who was out to kill him? Why did David refuse to lift up his hand against Saul?

At least part of the answer is found in the fact that David recognized Saul as the Lord's anointed. No less than six times in these chapters David refers to Saul as "the Lord's anointed." It was the Lord who had chosen Saul and established him as Israel's king. David resisted revenge against Saul even after all Saul had done to him and all that Saul wanted to do to him because of his respect for the Lord's anointed king. Because of his respect for the king's office. (Even if it was hard for him to respect the person in the office.) Because of his respect for and submission to the sovereignty of God who had placed Saul in the office of king.

David resolved that he would not take matters into his own hands, but would leave it to God to do with Saul as He pleased. It is not to say that David excused Saul's behavior or absolved him. It is not to say that David just set back and passively let Saul carry out his maniacal aims. It is to say that David resisted revenge because he was confident God would take care of Saul in His time. In His own way.

As appealing as vengeance must have seemed to David, what he desired even more was to honor God in all his actions – including his relationship with Saul.

What can we learn from this? I see two lessons or applications:

1. One obvious application: We are to respect those whom God has placed in positions of authority over us – whether civil or spiritual – because of the office they hold, even if for some reason we find it hard to respect them personally.

During the 1990s many Americans felt contempt for President Clinton because of his personal behavior in office and perceived shortcomings in his character..

In the last eight years many Americans (of a different political persuasion) felt contempt or hatred for President Bush because of their personal dislike for him or their opposition to his policies.

Whether or not we agree with our presidents or other political leaders, God calls us to treat them with respect and honor because of the offices they hold. We may find all kinds of fault with their character or conduct or policies or job performance, but we are to treat them with respect, just as David treated Saul with respect because he (Saul) was the Lord's anointed.

The same thing is true in the church. Whether you agree with every action or decision made by the Session as the governing body of the church, or the pastors, or others in positions of leadership in the church, you and I are called by God to treat them with honor and respect because of the office they hold and because of God's calling in their lives.

Does this mean we should ignore evidence of sin or poor judgment on the part of our leaders? No. Does it mean we should follow them blindly? Of course not. But as long as our leaders – whether in civil government or the church or any other organization – are in positions of authority, we should, like David, treat them with the respect and honor their office deserves.

2. Second, we are to resist revenge because it is God's prerogative, not ours. Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 12:17-21:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is not the only place in the New Testament where this principle is taught. Jesus – in the Sermon on the Mount – in talking about the realm of personal relationships said: Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile.

Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:15 says: Make sure nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

Peter in 1 Peter 3:9 says: Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you might inherit a blessing.

The Message paraphrase says: No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless – that's your job, to bless. You'll be a blessing and also get a blessing.

In the Romans 12 passage, Paul gives us three negatives and three positives. He tells us three times what not to do, followed each time by the positive alternative.

Verse 17 says: Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not retaliate. Instead (the positive alternative – verses 17-18): Do what is right in the eyes of everybody and do your best –

as far as it depends on you – to live at peace with everyone. (This is not always possible, but as far as it depends on *you*).

Verse 19 says: Do not take revenge. Don't take matters into your own hands. Resist revenge. Instead (the positive alternative – verses 19-20): Leave it to God. Make room for His wrath and vengeance. Do good to your adversary. Kill him or her with kindness. Maybe you'll even win over your enemy.

Verse 21 says: Don't let evil overcome you or defeat you. Instead (positive alternative): Overcome evil with good. To repay good for evil is to overcome evil with good. The way to get the best of evil is by doing good (*The Message*).

Someone has said: "Revenge is often like biting a dog because the dog bit you." What kind of sense does that make?

I heard about a guy (let's call him Sam) who was tired of being poked in the chest by a guy named Joe every time he saw him. Joe had an annoying habit of poking this guy in the chest whenever they talked.

So Sam came up with a plan. He decided to put a little bottle of nitroglycerine on a chain and wear it around his neck. The next time Joe came along and started poking him with his finger, the bottle of nitro would explode and blow off Joe's finger. That would teach him a lesson! Of course, the nitro would also blow up in Sam's face.

That is what revenge does.

I'm not going to say that those who betrayed Edmond Dantes and treated him unjustly didn't deserve what they got in the end. They did.

But I will say this: There is a better way to live than seeking revenge. God has a better way.

Thank God Joseph resisted revenge when he came face to face with his ten brothers in Egypt – the brothers who had years earlier stripped him of his robe, thrown him into a cistern, and then sold him into slavery in Egypt. His brothers meant it for evil, to be sure, but God meant it and used it for good.

Joseph saw, as David would centuries later, that revenge is not the answer.

Thank God, too, that Jesus resisted revenge when He suffered for us.

1 Peter 2:23-24 says:

When they hurled insults at Him, He did not retaliate.
When He suffered, He made no threats.
Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree,
so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.

“Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord. Leave it in God’s hands.

This is not to say that you just let people walk all over you or excuse their sin. No. But it does mean you don’t take matters into your own hands which do not belong to you to resolve.

In all our relationships, may we resist the urge to seek revenge. May we instead seek as followers of Christ to overcome evil with good, trusting God for the outcome.

Let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.